

Howard Kanovitz's New Paintings

by Sam Hunter

Howard Kanovitz is today perhaps the most poetic of the group of New Realists who began to forge novel expressive truths from the photographic image in the sixties. He has managed to reconstitute visual commonplaces so that their banality guarantees an unsuspected mystery and aura of romance. . Like the enigmas of Margritte, Kanovitz's imagery reveals a mercurial reversibility which subverts the scenario of our familiar world. Instead of simple facts and schema, we find equations of ambiguity; the meticulous airbrush technique and his exactness of vision produce an atmosphere of doubt rather than certitude, and pose questions of meaning which challenge the nature of artistic experience. Like the first discoverers of trompe l'oeil and especially the Flemish Renaissance masters, Kanovitz makes us acutely aware of artistic process and the miracle of vision, as well as material reality. The more crystalline his illusions, the less assurance they seem to provide. However, Kanovitz magically asserts through his paintings many of the unresolvable ambiguities of vision; nothing is less sure or more sure than a given set of visual facts, especially when mediated by photographic techniques and the hard, bright simulations of illustrated commercial journalism. By way of example, his *Carpenter's Sky* (1973) conjugated various stages of an image from simulated to its shadow in a manner reminiscent of Duchamp's prophetic experiment in the illusionist play of Tu m'.

To complicate the visual synthesis, Kanovitz includes the contemporary technology of slide projection in his image repertory. His cloudscapes raise questions, linked to Magritte, of distinctions between interior and external worlds, between visual actualities and their mirrored doubles. In keeping with the "cool" rationale of his period, however, there is no explicit reference to Surrealist fantasy. Problems in perception and an obsessive interest in new visual technology provide a sufficient basis for his complex pictorial content. While fantasy may be suppressed, there is an evident tension between perception and intellect, and the visual quandaries do have a psychological dimension, an

element or undertone difficult to define, of critical commentary despite the trancelike stillness and objectivity. Kanovitz began to work in his genre of controlled, stylized realism, based on the photograph, more than a decade ago, and showed his first sizable body of work in memorable exhibition at the Jewish museum in 1966. In an interview, he told the poet William Berkson that he envisioned his role as that of a film director, casting and arranging tableaux of arrested action. But, when the camera's fixities threatened to congeal scene and action into stereotype, some wayward painting energy was released, transforming dull fact into vital pictorial fictions, abstract patterns of shape and form, or riveting, obsessive visual detail. Berkson characterized the artist's work in this way: "Kanovitz's paintings....recall one of William Carlos Williams's quips: 'You can do lots if you know what's around you.' What Kanovitz works with in the these paintings is not so far removed from the material Williams brought into poetry-fragments of a public mythology which the fresh-eyed observer may find scattered around...and of which he may make some sensible use." In the late sixties Kanovitz abandoned the public mythology of photojournalism, leaving behind the alternatively anonymous or celebrated figures and visage taken from the communications media. Instead he began to examine the visual word from a more personal perspective, in the framework of the private "myth" of his own experience as an artist. This better provided him entrance for a characteristic poetic note, which mixed bland fact with a touch of romantic suggestion reminiscent of the strain of a darkling romantic realism imbedded in American tradition from Eakins to Hopper. The paintings and constructions of the past five years restricted their range of subject matter to domestic and studio interiors and appurtenances, divested of the human presence. He replaced a busy public pageant with a world of mute, inanimate objects over which a cataleptic calm reigned. He also sharpened the confrontations of invention and simulation by further investigation of trompe-l'oeil techniques, extending pictorial illusion into literal shape and palpable physical fact. A staircase in fleeing perspective, stacked-up canvases, a vacant painting wall, the ubiquitous windows (always a favorite motif), shaped canvas simulating radiators, furniture, and other commonplace objects of the home or studio were reverently documented and

transformed into an autonomous architecture. Then in London Kanovitz removed himself from the monastic studio environment, with such feats and feasts for the eye as his stunning, monumental cover girl and movie star, Mia Farrow, in *Journal* and the large-scale floral piece *Roses*. Of this intriguing technicolor world of the media, where everything looms larger and better than life, Daniel Boors-tin has aptly written, "fantasy is more real than reality, the image has more dignity than its original."

We hardly dare face our bewilderment, because our ambiguous experience is so pleasantly iridescent, and the solace of belief in contrived reality is so thoroughly real." Technically, Kanovitz's paintings have long seemed a triumph of virtuosity and skill, yet his accomplishment would not long sustain our interest, lacking a more meaningful content. There is more at stake than cunning execution or exquisitely turned illusions. Something of the ubiquitous American Experience of urban loneliness haunts many of these paintings, the sure knowledge that even the most stubborn faith in visual facts and the hard-sell world of our consumer's paradise does not provide sufficient human sustenance or consolation. In past work, Kanovitz faithfully captured all the meretricious charm of the media, but his vision was always shadowed at the edges by a certain sense of the hollowness of media visual claims and false optimism. There have also been constant, if coded, references to art history and to the artistic process, reaffirming the artist's inescapable role as observer and visual poet, it not commentator. The more mysterious confrontations of fact and fiction, including the artist's own public situation, unlocked fresh meanings in the wasteland of American pop culture for him, and linked his work to more traditional concepts of individual creativity and to the deeper life of our culture. Now, in his current New York one-man show at the Stefanotty Gallery, Kanovitz's work discloses beguiling new optical ambiguities and humanist implications, despite, one's first impression of a hard, spare, and pristine clarity. He has abandoned the declamatory public stance of his rather simplistic, glossy, color-supplement and mural-scale imagery of the London years in *Journal* in favor of small-scale scenes, intimacy, and oblique insinuation. One is invited to be privy to his visual

secrets as a close and privileged, unobserved observer in the studio and in his personal life. The paintings themselves are smaller, more meditative, and of a more private character. They even convey a certain indefinable poignancy, as if the unequivocal visual values of the photographic image, which continues to be their source, were not entirely reassuring in a human sense. Visual meanings are polyvalent, both obvious and subtle, objective and subjective, confirming the external world in its familiar guise and subverting it. This was also true in the past, but subtler shades of perceptual and phenomenal meanings have now intruded with an added tonal richness and design complexity and, incidentally, with a superlative new technical assurance in execution. I find myself responding with excitement to the rather novel interest in vantage point in some of these muted dramas of the banal which are also so mysteriously charged and eloquent. *In the Morning* tips the walls of a bedroom, a night table with clock, and lampshade to a nearly vertiginous acute angle, as the waking eye of the prone human occupant would perceive them. Kanovitz resists any temptation to push matters further towards fantasy, either by associating with Surrealist incongruity or with the freakish distortions of an Expressionist subjectivism. He simply registers the noncommittal fact that the world looks very cockeyed, indeed, as we waken to full consciousness from sleep. Why this simple visual statement invites further speculation, I am not sure, because Kanovitz is an almost purely optical rather than a metaphysical realist. Lurking somewhere in the shadows, in all those bright, rather cheerful light reflections, and in the angled decor is a scenario, half-concealed like those in the "new wave" novels and films of Robbe-Grillet and Butor. The objective world has become problematic, even when we convince ourselves that it is purged of subjectivity, at least by comparison with the psychologically motivated tableaux or narratives of the past. Kanovitz has stated the hypothesis rather neatly in a recent interview, which clues us into the curious new amalgam of bland visual information and angst: "There is nothing in my work that isn't real, yet there is nothing real in my work but paint, canvas, and stretcher.

There is much though that seems to be real, and this resemblance is a way of cooling off my anxious vision--I might add your anxious vision." I suppose it is this suppressed but not entirely absent anxiety which makes the work so modern and authentic for us, even though one is tempted to connect it immediately to the great sonorous names of "illusionist" tradition: Van Eyck, Vermeer, Velasquez, or, for that matter, Manet of *The Buffet at the Folios-Bergere*. All of these artists managed to make the reality of everyday life at once palpable and immaterial. They bear more relevance to the current optical preoccupations of the group of artists whom Richard Martin helpfully designated "Imagist Realists" than do Courbet, Land seer, or the more simplistic masters either of material truths or sentimental anecdote in the realist tradition. When observed reality is raised to levels of magical intensity in the act of perception, then our discourse shifts from objective fact to subjective vision. All our cherished assumptions about the world of appearances tend to warp and buckle, optically if not philosophically. Paradoxically, there is none of the irony or dissent of Pop Art, nor the radical moral urgency of Abstract Expressionism. Traces of anxiety persist of course, but in modalities suited to the cool vision of the late sixties rather than the exhausted, overheated rhetoric of the fifties. We discern an added paradox in Kanovitz's art in that it manages to be both intimate and formal, and aspires rather nobly to transform banal visual circumstance, essentially a form of genre, into credible eternal relations. Something of Kanovitz's unsuspected new richness and range of effect are encapsulated in two of his most carefully deliberated compositions in the current show, *Hamptons Drive-In* and *Hotel Quai Voltaire*. The low key horizontal landscape with an outdoor movie, so reminiscent of Hopper, makes much of the dying light, gilding the silhouetted background, invaded by Hollywood's giant-screen black and white dream world. The warm, sepia-tinted shadows are brewed from the same pot that produced his muted paintings of the mid-sixties, mainly genre scenes; they can be understood as a visual reprise of America's more lugubrious traditions of chiaroscuro mixed with nostalgia perhaps for ancient stereoscopic daguerreotypes, browned with age and neglect. He paints the hushed reverent moment of transition from day into evening, the unreal "violet hour" from T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, perhaps, "when the human

engine waits...throbbing between two lives." Under these conditions of transfiguring light and with the contrast of natural and artificial imagery, a filmic dreamland set against the picturesque sunset in the most barren roadside environments imaginable one feels and resists the tug of pathos. It is fascinating to find the lonely and vacuous American suburban landscape thus delineated and even injected with a certain tension and volupte`, yet mercifully free of any kind of attitudinizing on the artist's part. Kanovitz achieves an absolutely right tension of mood, as sustaining as it is dispiriting. Whatever our private associations may be, and there are rich overtones, the steady focus of his vision returns us to an admiring consideration of the artistic process itself, whose meticulous realization proves entirely absorbing and liberating from any possible sense of environmental oppression. The bedroom scene of *Hotel Quai Voltaire* has a similar thrust of intention, but within a more private context. We observe the artist's wife reading in a brass-framed vintage bed in a slightly moldy, out-of-date Paris hotel room whose prosperous moment has passed. There is a touch of Victorian rectitude both in the modest, almost statuesque human subject, and in the somewhat overwrought décor. The richness of pictorial effect and darkened tonal modulations of the bedroom contrast sharply with the harsh pink tiles, fluorescent light, and unapologetic intimacy of the modern sterile bathroom.

It takes a moment to realize that we are actually regarding a reflection of the figure in bed, caught in a mirrored door which occupies half the pictorial field. The observer's location and viewpoint have become an issue once more. The human presence is placed at one further remove than the bathroom appurtenances, visually and psychologically. The paradoxical vision shifts keep eye and mind alert. It is a completely absorbing, intricate, and bold device. Kanovitz has undertaken more challenging visual situations as his techniques and command of nuanced oppositions came more firmly to hand. His new work contains other implications, too. One of his core meanings and a characteristic pictorial juxtaposition matches the camera's simplistic truths against an individually inflected, visual enrichment. The labyrinthine and, at first glance, baffling repetitions of bed frames and other imagery in *Hotel Quai Voltaire*

resolve their redundancies as conjugations of pictorial illusions and their mirrored doubles, which provide the curious "distancing" or alienating effects familiar to us from the work of those master illusionists, Velasquez of Las Meninas and the late Manet. In his London period two years ago Kanovitz proved his aptitude for brilliant, large-scale, pop-tintured imagery of a "public" character. But the attraction of a more reflective and intimate art could not be resisted, and it reestablishes its prerogatives in his absorbing current exhibition. He is a somewhat underrated master of independent blend of poetic realism, as personal as it is obviously stereotyped, at once formal and intimate, tough-minded and gently ruminative by turns. The newest work strikes a rare balance between the transforming alchemy of vision, subtly mediated by the camera's eye, and an uncanny grasp of tangible reality, at the deepest perceptual and phenomenal levels he has yet plumbed.

--Sam Hunter